

July 4th Fireworks Depend on Healthy Forests

By: Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

Like thousands of patriotic Americans - from South Dakota and from all around the country - I have enjoyed celebrating Independence Day with fireworks at Mt. Rushmore. That's why I'm sure I was not alone in my disappointment when I learned that wildfire risks have forced the National Park Service to cancel the fireworks for July 4, 2010. However this decision highlights the need for swift and important changes to our forest management policy, and I'm hopeful we can have a renewed focus on these critical issues.

Since 2003, more than 40 million acres across the nation have burned - an area nearly the size of the entire state of South Dakota. We are not immune to this danger, and in fact we are at an increased risk due to aggressive pine beetle infestations. Wildfires present significant threats to our economy, environment and the natural beauty of our land.

That's why last year I worked with a bipartisan group of western lawmakers in Congress to introduce new legislation that would address this growing problem. My bill is known as the Healthy Forests Restoration Amendments Act. This bipartisan, common-sense legislation will strengthen the existing tools available to federal forest managers to bring the most diseased and fire prone forests back to health.

As South Dakotans in the western part of our state know all too well, our forests have been under consistent and extreme stress from drought, insects, diseases, and wildfire for years. In 2003, Congress passed the bipartisan Healthy Forests Restoration Act, or "HFRA," to enable managers of public lands to mitigate the risk posed by wildfire to local communities. This law represented a critical first step in updating federal forest management policy, but it's clear we need to add to the forest management tools we have put in place.

By updating HFRA based on lessons learned since 2003, the Healthy Forests Restoration Amendments Act will ensure federal forest managers have the tools they need to proactively address the threat of wildfire, disease, and insect infestation to forests and the local communities that depend on them. Under this bill, land managers will be able to act with much greater speed to protect infrastructure in rural communities through fuels reduction projects. It also improves efficiency by allowing land managers to conduct necessary connected actions

such as weed management, tree planting, road work, and other important projects, when using the HFRA National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for fuels reduction projects.

In the meantime, I've led another effort in the House urging the Obama Administration to bolster funding in the coming year for forest management at the Forest Service. This investment will allow the Black Hills National Forest to boost timber sales, supporting the local economy and at the same time reducing risks from pine beetles and wildfire. A short-term increase in timber management funding is the kind of targeted policy that would provide much greater return on taxpayer dollars in the long run. By addressing these threats proactively through sound forest management practices, the nation would avoid spending many hundreds of millions of tax payer dollars each year to fight catastrophic wildfires and realizing massive losses of public resources. Fire suppression costs for the USDA Forest Service and the Department of Interior have exceeded \$1 billion every year since 2000. Moreover, it's been estimated that an increase of \$151 million in forest management funding will create 17,600 new jobs in rural communities that have been hard hit by the recession.

While we won't have the opportunity to enjoy the fireworks over Mt. Rushmore this 4th of July, I'm hopeful that we can implement the right policies to restore our forests' health, foster local economic development, and, ultimately, allow us to celebrate July 4th with fireworks for years to come in the future.